

Some Findings on Culture Consumption and Happiness

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All modern nations have a professional ‘arts’ sector that provides aesthetic experiences. Among the products of this industry are: drama, dance, music, fiction, poetry, paintings and design. As outlets are theatres, concert halls, museums, galleries and bookstores. This trade is also known as the ‘Cultural sector’ (with capital C). In The Netherlands this sector employs about 2% of the working force and its size equals about 1% of the Gross national Product (Poort et al. 2006).

The products of this cultural sector are highly valued and for this reason many developed nations support its production financially and encourage cultural consumption. Involvement in arts is typically seen as part of living a civilized way of life. It is for this reason arts education is in the curriculum of most schools, in particular in schools that aim at ‘Bildung’.

This practice has been contested. One objection is that arts consumption is used by elites to distinguish themselves from lower classes (e.g. Bourdieu 1984). In this view little value is placed on the consumption itself and in this line it has been questioned whether an elite culture provides better experiences than a folk culture or other leisure activities such as watching a soccer game. Proponents of the arts sector claim that culture consumption brings with it various positive effects, such as relaxation, understanding and inspiration, which together make for a more satisfying life.

Does culture consumption really add to happiness? If so, does it add more to happiness more than other pastime and not only for elites? To answer these questions we must distinguish between effects of cultural consumption on transient mood and lasting life-satisfaction. When it come to mood the question is how well people feel when consuming a cultural product, such as listening to a concert, and whether they feel better in the concert hall than when passing their free time in another way, such as when gardening. When the effect on lasting life-satisfaction is at stake the first question is whether culture consumers are happier than non-consumers and whether a change in someone’s culture consumption is followed by a change in happiness.

Effect on momentary mood

The effect of cultural consumption on mood can be assessed using techniques of multiple-moment interrogation, such as experience sampling or mood diaries. These techniques allow comparison of mood before, during and after consumption and also comparison with mood during other activities. In a large scale experience sampling study (over 100.000 moments of some 20.000 participants) it was found that mood was at its best during the moments that people make love. Second came cultural activities together with sports activities. Among cultural activities ‘theatre, dance and concert’ were ranked first, then ‘singing, performing’, followed by ‘exhibitions, museums, library’, finally ‘hobby, art, crafts’. Average mood scores during these cultural activities were higher than these found among all other leisure activities, such as ‘chatting, socializing’, ‘gardening’, ‘playing with children’ and ‘watching TV’ (MacKerron 2006, table 18.6).

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Effect on life-satisfaction

Research findings on the relation between culture consumption and life-satisfaction are available in the World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven 2016). To date (November 2016) this collection contains standardized descriptions of 52 research findings on this issue, 8 of which 8 specifically give answers to our questions.

Most (7) of the findings concern same-time correlations, which are all positive. People who attend cultural manifestations or buy pieces of arts tend to be happier than people who do not. The difference in happiness is about 0,1 on scale 0-10. This difference remains after controlling for factors such as income, education and marital status (6 studies). The correlation is similar to or stronger than that for participation in sports (3 studies). One study found a stronger correlation between happiness and culture consumption among the least happy, which suggests a consolation effect. Another study found a stronger effect between happiness and culture consumption among the low educated; a finding which does not fit the above mentioned complaint that cultural consumption is elitist.

One study followed people over-time and found that *change* in culture consumption was accompanied by *change* in life-satisfaction in the same direction: individuals who increased their cultural consumption became happier, while less participation was accompanied by a lowering of happiness. This strongly suggests a causal effect of cultural consumption on happiness, but it cannot be proved. The effect size is bigger in this case, equivalent to 0,2 on happiness scale 0-10. This effect of change in culture consumption was stronger than changes seen when increasing or decreasing in visits to cinemas, dance halls and sport facilities. Again the differences remained after control for socio-economic variables.

In sum

The available research findings suggest that culture consumption *does* add to happiness, at least in the developed nations.

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